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# THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

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Friday, February 02, 2007

**By Jim Harger**  
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Mayor George Heartwell took on public employee unions Thursday, saying laws that favor unions prevent cities from combining services that could save taxpayers money.

In a speech to the Downtown Rotary Club, Heartwell called for changes to several state laws, including Act 312, the law that lets police and firefighter unions seek binding arbitration if they become deadlocked in their contract talks.

"Act 312 tilts the field toward labor in police and fire negotiations and stymies consolidation efforts," Heartwell said.

Local union officials were swift to condemn Heartwell.

"I'm surprised he's that politically stupid to make a statement like that in an election year," said David Leonard, chief steward of the Grand Rapids Police Officers Labor Council.

"He will see a full-court press opposing his election campaign from organized labor should he actually push forward his agenda."

Fil Iorio, a labor lawyer who represents the Grand Rapids Employees Independent Union and recently completed an Act 312 arbitration hearing for the Detroit police officers union, said Heartwell's quest has little chance of succeeding in Lansing.

Since police and firefighters cannot strike, Act 312 allows them to settle their labor disputes fairly, Iorio said. "This is a mechanism to ensure labor peace."

Besides Act 312, Heartwell also called for changes to state laws that prevent local governments from joining forces because they require that wages and benefits rise to the highest level offered by the merging agencies.

"These state statutes get in the way," said Heartwell, who added the issue to a reprise of the "State of the City" address he delivered nearly two weeks ago.

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Kwame comments

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After starting out with his remarks about creating a Mental Health Authority, Kilpatrick next listed amending PA 312, which requires binding arbitration between governmental units and labor unions representing public employees.

"We need to do something to help the education community be allowed to have some certainty when it comes to budgeting," Kilpatrick said. "I don't advocate getting rid of PA 312, but I believe we have to amend it."

Kilpatrick brought the topic of amending PA 312 up following his speech in reply to an audience question about Detroit Public Schools.

"In 1967 that was introduced in the Legislature by none other than Coleman YOUNG," Kilpatrick said. "Later he said he thought it was the worst thing he'd done in the Legislature. We really need to amend PA 312. Right now one bad decision by an arbitrator can wipe out all the progress we accomplish."